

## Music Associated with Santiago and the Pilgrimage

### The Medieval Period

The tradition of pilgrimage to Santiago de Compostela is more than 1,000 years old, and over that time musical styles and tastes, indeed the very language of music itself and the instruments used to produce it, have changed radically. These changes are well illustrated by the music one can associate with the Camino over the millennium. A substantial portion of Camino music is, as one would expect, religious, but there are also popular and secular tunes likely to have been sung, played, danced or listened to by pilgrims. This essay is the first of two on Camino related music in this collection, and it covers early music, music prior to 1500.<sup>1</sup> The second essay discusses music from the renaissance to the present.

The classification of music as "Camino" or even as "Spanish" or "French" is fraught with difficulties. This essay concerns itself with music common in Spain, and to a lesser extent in France, during the medieval era. In those years before the Protestant Reformation when the pilgrimage was at its apogee, pilgrims came to Santiago de Compostela from all across Europe: The British Isles, the Low Countries, the Germanic language regions in Northern Europe, and even Slavic-speaking regions far to the east as well as from Italy, France and Iberia. Each region, and even each subregion within them, had its particular musical culture, local musical traditions especially evident in the popular tunes sung and played in homes, on farms and in taverns and inns. Moving across Europe toward Santiago, the pilgrims from all corners of Europe brought some of their music with them, introducing the melodies, if not the words, to fellow pilgrims and others along the route. And all of the regions sharing the Roman rite also shared a common corpus of religious music.<sup>2</sup>

When the pilgrimage to Santiago was at its peak in the latter years of the Middle Ages, religious music, that is music used in the Mass or at some other religious ceremony, was similar throughout Roman rite Europe, and consisted of Latin religious texts set to be chanted or later to be sung by a polyphonic group. The texts included the ordinary of the Mass, biblical verses and a small number of later poems with religious themes. *Stabat Mater dolorosa*, lamentations of the Virgin at the foot of the cross, was one such poem, and it was frequently set to music from the late medieval period well into the 20<sup>th</sup> century. An early activity of the centralized church was to establish norms for music at religious services. Gregorian chant, popularized a few years ago on recordings made by the monks of the Monastery of Santo Domingo de Silos not far from the Camino in Burgos province, is said to have resulted from an edict of Pope Gregory in the 6<sup>th</sup> century (there is much debate about this attribution). It became the standard worship music for a very long time throughout Europe.

Members of monastic orders carried copies, on parchments or in their memories, of chants, and later of polyphonic masses, hymns and motets as they traveled from monastery to monastery, while the Bishops regularly met in national and sometimes international conclaves, on occasion accompanied by their cathedral musical leader who shared tropes and sometimes even manuscripts with colleagues from other episcopal sees. That leader might also be dispatched to some distant cathedral specifically to copy its collection of music for use at home. In the late middle ages polyphonic music, more

similar to the music we are now accustomed to hearing, was introduced.<sup>3</sup> In the same manner as the earlier chants had spread, masses in the polyphonic style composed in one country passed to many others, and composers born in one country were called to work in others. Italy and Flanders, what is now Belgium and the Netherlands, were particularly important areas for this new polyphonic music. Since Spain, Italy and the Low Countries were under a common government for part of the period, some Flemish composers worked in Spain. Likewise, composers came from Italy to Spain and *vice versa*, though these movements were far more important after 1500.

A late medieval pilgrim coming from London, Brussels, Krakow or Copenhagen who attended mass in a variety of cathedrals enroute to Santiago would have heard music that differed only in detail from one region to another even while traveling across a variety of linguistic and cultural zones. By 1500, some of the cathedrals had installed organs and regularly heard polyphonic music, while others were more conservative and still used only chant at services, but there would have been few surprises. If the pilgrim understood Latin, or was familiar with the Latin words used in the most common religious texts, then it was not difficult to follow the lyric being sung no matter where it was heard.

The same could not be said of the music the pilgrim might have heard sung by other pilgrims as they marched or in the inns, taverns and hostals of the towns through which the Camino passed. While church music was sung in Latin, popular music was in the local vernacular, and a pilgrim would soon pass from hearing popular songs with words he or she could understand to ones in languages that often must have sounded like gibberish. And the pilgrim did not even have to leave the home country for this to have happened. Eugen Weber, the UCLA historian of France, has shown how modern French, really the language of Paris and the Ile de France, only became a national language in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, and various dialects, often mutually unintelligible, could be found as one traveled even fairly short distances across rural France. A similar study could be done for Spain where *castellano*, outside of Spain now usually called *español* or Spanish, was really just the language of Castilla, in particular the area between León and Madrid, and it was but one of several vernaculars. Today's pilgrim in Spain still gets a taste of those vernacular languages. The Camino Francés in Spain begins in a Basque region with signs using words incomprehensible to even the most fluent speaker of *castellano*, while it terminates in Galicia where the signs in Galego can be comprehended but only with a little difficulty.

Words were not set to all of the popular melodies, for there were many instrumental marching and dancing songs. Every region, and sometimes every town, had a dance or dances associated with it. Those dances, in their turn, each required particular kinds of music with rhythm and tempo to match the dancing steps. For example, the dance of Aragon, the region one passes through if they take the *Camino aragonesa* crossing from France at Somport, is the *aragonesa*. Some of the dances, the *aragonesa* among them, became inspirations for composition of music in later eras, on occasion by composers living far from the region where the dance originated.<sup>4</sup> Likewise there were differences in musical instruments, and some instruments were strongly associated with particular areas. The guitar-based popular music of Spain must have sounded quite odd to a pilgrim accustomed to the fiddle-based popular music of Scandinavia (and *vice versa*). While I have not seen any evidence to support the idea, I would expect that more than a

few musical instruments were brought home as souvenirs by returning pilgrims. On my first visit to Santiago (as a tourist not a pilgrim) I brought home an ocarina I bought from a street busker, an instrument I had read about but never previously seen!

The authors of most popular music and also of much religious music written before 1500 are unknown to us. Even the date and place of composition can be difficult if not impossible to identify. Some early composers of religious music are known, for example, Hildegard von Bingen, a nun who lived in the Rhineland during the 12<sup>th</sup> century, but most of the chants and not a few of the later polyphonic works can at best be attributed to a particular church or monastery and the date on which they were first known to have been recorded on a parchment housed there. If, as frequently happened, the parchment was a spoil of war or a victim of fire, or it was erased and became a palimpsest (a manuscript page that has been written on, scraped off and used again) for a new document, those things are uncertain. For some of the music even the century of composition is impossible to determine with any certainty.

Collections of religious music were compiled during the late Middle Ages, and there are a number of Codices and other collections at various cathedrals and monasteries as well as in national archives scattered across Europe. They are essential sources for the study of early music. Four of those collections have strong associations with the Camino: the *Llibre Vermell* at the Monastery of Montserrat outside Barcelona; the *Codex las Huelgas* at the Convento de las Huelgas, adjacent to the Camino as it leaves Burgos; the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* now at the archive at el Escorial and attributed to Alfonso X (“El Sabio”) king of Castilla y León in the 13<sup>th</sup> century; and, of course, the famous *Codex Calixtinus* in the treasury and archive of the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela. The *Cancioneros Musicals*<sup>5</sup>, or songbooks, in these documents record the words and, in forms sometimes very difficult to interpret, the music, of religious songs pilgrims sang and heard enroute to Santiago as well as the music played and sung in churches and at religious occasions. It is from these documents that we can reconstruct a part of the sonic environment of the early pilgrims to Santiago. But these manuscripts document almost exclusively religious music. They do include popular music sung outside the churches in praise of the Virgin Mary, the Saints or Jesus, but the collections include few dances or secular songs, few of the love ballads, laments and working songs so important to the popular tradition.

While there were written records of most religious music by the end of the Middle Ages, the popular music played and sung outside the church was often unrecorded, and it remains difficult to assign age and even area of origin to many of the songs. Mostly the music was played and sung by illiterate peasants, buskers and villagers, and it was passed down through generations as a tradition based on listening and copying, not on a written record. Many of the lyrics and some of the melodies tended to be highly localized, unknown to people living only a few tens of kilometers away. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, as peasant societies were beginning to disappear from Europe, there was a veritable industry collecting and recording this localized music. Some of it still being played in remote villages at that time could be traced to the medieval era, melodies and lyrics all but unknown beyond their region and uncorrupted by contact with the outside.<sup>6</sup> Other melodies acquired local words if they were to be sung, but the melody itself might be known more widely. Buskers, itinerant

musicians and musical troupes, traveled over large areas to perform at markets and fairs, often meeting counterparts from whom they copied the melodies and dances of other regions. As a consequence melodic elements from quite distant regions are sometimes included in what is considered to be the typical music of an area. Melodies did not require translation, but words did, so many fewer lyrics were transported. Some of the popular melodies even worked their way into religious music. Several of the hymns in praise of the Virgin in the *Cantigas de Santa Maria* use melodies from popular tunes, and some of those melodies originated in far away Germany and England.

Research in the past century salvaged melodies and sets of lyrics dating from the medieval era, but how these might have been performed in the Middle Ages remains a question keeping many musicological scholars employed. Until about 1980, medieval music was mostly performed using modern instruments and techniques. Since then period performance techniques have become *de rigueur*. The goal of period performance, popular for renaissance and classical music as well as medieval music, is to come as close as possible to the kinds of instruments, the techniques of playing them, and the vocal styles that would have been used at the time the music was first composed. For more recent musical eras period performance techniques are not too difficult to reconstruct, for many musical instruments from the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries still exist, and over time the notation of music became more thorough so that it is possible to determine with fair certainty how a piece by Haydn or Mozart would have sounded to an audience in 18<sup>th</sup> century Vienna when those composers were working. The information can then be used to reproduce that sound.

While the words of medieval religious and popular compositions can usually be determined with certainty, such basic elements of music as pitch and tempo are often not clear from the surviving manuscripts. We have little direct evidence of how the pieces were sung, and few musical instruments from the medieval era survive. Lacking more direct information, manuscript illustrations, frescoes and carvings on cathedral walls and columns have become sources for musicologists. Careful analysis of those visual representations of musical instruments gives a better sense of how the instruments looked and were played. Early Music Television, a production of the University of Oklahoma, made a quite fascinating program in 1989 showing how depiction of musical instruments on the Romanesque "Portico de Gloria" by Maestro Matteo, one of the artistic jewels in the cathedral of Santiago de Compostela, was used to recreate those instruments and the way they were played.<sup>7</sup>

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1. While it might make professional historians blanch, I arbitrarily choose this date as the end of the Medieval Era, for it is a convenient and easily remembered break point

2. There is a third strain of medieval music not dealt with here because it is not strongly associated with the Camino, the secular music of the Troubadours popular at royal courts and in aristocratic circles. The large remaining body of this work includes lots of paeans to beautiful (aristocratic and royal) women, love songs, especially laments of unrequited love, as well as accounts of famous battles, jousts and other historical events. It was highly literary and considered an art form even in its time. Only a few pilgrims were likely to have heard or sung such music enroute, however.

3. I am using the term polyphonic in an unrestrictive way to include all forms of postchant religious music. For more information on this, and all other musical topics, see the *Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, the ultimate reference source for music.

4. For one example, listen to the Russian Rimsky-Korsakov's "Capriccio Espagnol."
5. A *cancionero* is a collection of poetry, while a *cancionero musical* is a collection of poetry set to music.
6. A number of famous composers engaged in this activity, for example Grieg in Norway and Bartok in Hungary. Several frequently performed compositions like Canteloube's "Songs of the Auvergne" and Ralph Vaughan Williams' "English Folksong Suite" resulted from this research. The Smithsonian Institution and the Library of Congress have collected folk music from remoter parts of the United States including the hollows of Appalachia, the islands off the Carolinas and Georgia, and the pueblos of New Mexico. Folk groups, for example the Carter Family in Virginia, then brought some of it directly to public attention, while other performers like Hank Guthrie and George Gershwin in *Porgy and Bess* used that material as a basis for compositions.
7. Caldwell, Susan Havens. 1989. *And they sang a new song: Twenty-four musical elders at Santiago de Compostela*. Norman: University of Oklahoma, 30-minute videocassette.

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